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ABSTRACT

The source of most of the opposition to educational assessment is fear on the part of administrators and teachers that assessment will be used as an instrument of evaluation. Assessment plans make it impossible to identify individual teachers or schools. Thus, the fear that someone may be penalized because of a bad assessment is not realistic. Furthermore, all school systems at present do a great deal of testing. If school authorities wanted to use test results as evaluating instruments, they already have plenty of information to go on. The main problem in all assessment programs is that results are expected too quickly. Emphasis should be on longitudinal studies and comparison after multiple completions of the testing cycle. (Author)

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TOWARDS STATEWIDE EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Ten years ago I was responsible for the AFT's favorable position towards national assessment of progress in education. In 1969 I became a member of CAPE. I have been supportive of all assessment efforts at all levels because I believe that continued or increased public support for education is dependent upon proving the need for schooling. The mystique of education--something inherently good--will no longer carry the burden of the argument.

The source of most of the opposition to educational assessment is fear on the part of administrators and teachers that assessment will be used as in instrument of evaluation. As a matter of fact all of the assessment plans that I have seen thus far make it impossible to identify individual teachers or schools. Thus the fear that someone may be penalized because of a bad assessment is not realistic. Furthermore, all school systems at present do a great deal of testing, particularly in elementary schools. If school authorities wanted to use test results as evaluating instruments they already have plenty of information to go on. In secondary schools, of course, it is almost impossible to single out the impact of a particular teacher.

The main problem in all assessment programs, is, as I see it, that results are expected too quickly. Emphasis should be on longitudinal studies and comparison after multiple completions of the testing cycle.

Some Advantages and Disadvantages

The national program for assessing progress in education now being carried on under the sponsorship of the Education Commission of the States

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is a good program but it would be terribly expensive to expand its coverage so that it could become a diagnostic instrument. It is designed to tell us how we are doing as a nation, but even this limited objective cannot be realized soon.

Trying to make the national assessment program more comprehensive raises the spector of federal control; hence the next thing to take a look at logically is turning the detailed job over to the states. The only limit on the comprehensive nature of statewide assessment is the amount of money that can be made available. The willingness of state governments to support an assessment program will vary a great deal, at least initially, but the Education Commission of the States and educational organizations can play a very helpful role here, too. ECS undoubtedly will call conferences of those state officials responsible for assessment programs once the programs begin to roll, and it should be possible to develop a great deal of voluntary conformity.

Interesting By-Products Possible

If statewide educational assessment is accepted by any large number of states, it will undoubtedly produce some interesting by-products. One of these will be the impact on school finance.

A week or two after the rejection of the Rodriguez appeal by a five-to-four decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, a New Jersey court held that the same equality principle unsuccessfully argued in Rodriguez should apply in that state. More recently, the Federal Supreme Court held that local school districts have a legal responsibility to provide at least a minimum of successful education to each student. It will be impossible for local school districts and states to comply with these legal requirements without some form of statewide educational assessment.

The courts have, in effect, changed the traditional rules for drafting state aid laws. Increasingly, dollars must be tied to results. I don't know if anyone planned it this way, but there could hardly be anything more timely than statewide educational assessment.

Another interesting by-product to be expected from the statewide assessment programs should be the updating of data and perhaps revision of findings of the Coleman report. With the mass of new data sure to be generated by state assessment programs, educational progress can be correlated against many other variables in the same way that Coleman did--economic status, educational level of parents, per child cost of education, teacher and method variables, and so on. The state assessment programs, therefore, can provide us a mass of research data which could be achieved in no other way.

Some Cautionary Notes

Statewide educational assessment is not a panacea, of course. Care should be taken not to promise too much. As I said in my introductory section, the value of assessment programs only emerges when the testing cycle has been run through several times. It is possible to guess at trends from limited information, but it can be dangerous to do this, too. An effort should be made to get long-term commitments from state officials not to avoid a demand for speedy results.

I am aware, of course, that there is a great deal of variation among present state assessment programs. Some are more complete than others, but I don't think that there is much conflict among them. Perhaps a few years from now it will be useful to attempt to rationalize the various systems, but I don't feel any urgency about this at the present time. As far as I am concerned, the rule is, "Full speed ahead; we can regroup later."